



***The Land Ballot***  
by Fleur Adcock.  
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Reviewed by Janet  
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In her latest collection,  
*The Land Ballot*,  
Fleur Adcock builds a  
narrative of her family  
history, focussing on her

grandparent's emigration to New Zealand during World War I and their early years in New Zealand. Like many settlers, her grandparents, Sam and Eva, obtained a small bush farm on the slopes of Mount Pirongia in the North Island of New Zealand by way of a land ballot and set about clearing the bush and farming the land. The soil proved deficient in minerals and before long Sam returned to town and his previous occupation as a hairdresser, leaving his son Cyril to milk the cows and look after the farm before and after school.

The opening poem "Where the Farm Was" begins with Adcock imagining she is 'half occupying the eyes' of her father Cyril when he was a bare-footed boy looking over the farm from horseback. A sense of dislocation is present from the opening lines:

He is not there/I am not there  
but we are haunting it somewhat

Fast-forward to the present day, and in the final poem, "State Highway 31", Adcock views the farm again, this time from the vantage point of driving through the district and past where the farm had been. It was unrecognisably altered, and she ends with the words, 'my stomach yearned for just one more glimpse.'

Between the image of the past and the present, Adcock gives a vivid account of the lives of her grandparents and her father, along with other family members and neighbours and a remote rural community. The poems are arranged in roughly chronological order with digressions back to before her grandparents emigrated. Although ostensibly about her grandparents, her father, Cyril, is a surer figure and is given his own voice in the poems subtitled 'Cyril speaks'.

Adcock has her own complex history of moving between New Zealand and England. In this collection she returns to her familiar themes of family, place, emigration, and belonging.

The poems are careful, measured and accessible. The language is almost laconic at times, which perhaps befits the time and place and circumstances, but interrupted in places by sudden, arresting turns of phrase. An example is found in "Armistice Day" when the words 'his retina stencilled with their acidic blaze' describe the effect of the celebratory fireworks on fourteen-year-old Cyril.

An elegiac note creeps in towards the end. "Walking Off" starts with a neighbouring family leaving their farm, but Adcock soon turns her attention to the vestiges of the rural community left behind to fade away:

and the hall couldn't up and walk off: it lay  
under its drooping macrocarpas and wilted  
letting the blackberries crawl over its roof –

"Cousins" is one of several poems about Sam's niece, Beryl, who is entrusted to the care of Sam and Eva and later disowned. Adcock notes the absence of Beryl from a photograph and ends with the question:

What variety of pastoral is this?  
A temporary one; as they all are.

Suddenly the poem is about far more than Beryl and her place in the family.

*The Land Ballot* tackles a well-worn topic in a fresh way and, because of its subject matter, has both literary and general appeal.